

The Telegraph

Booker Prize 2012: Amanda Foreman: We were choosing the best novel of the year

Man Booker judge Amanda Foreman explains that until the very last day, it was too close to call who had won this year's prize, which went to Hilary Mantel for *Bring Up The Bodies*.



Booker judge Amanda Foreman Photo: Geoff Pugh

By Amanda Foreman

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Back in December, at the first meeting of the judges for the 2012 Man Booker Prize, the chair Sir Peter Stothard led the discussion on our criteria for the next 10 months of deliberation. This is how the process for literary prizes normally works; when it fails to happen, the judging process can quickly descend into every man (or woman) for himself. The disagreements become personal, resentments build, and suddenly it's no longer about books but about egos.

One of the annual media rituals of the Man Booker Prize is the dredging up of rows from previous years. There is certainly no shortage of them, from the judges who have walked out in protest: Malcolm Muggeridge in 1971, Nicholas Mosley in 1991; or who denounced the winner: Julia Neuberger in 1994, or a fellow judge: Joanna Lumley in 1985; or who spoke for laughs and caused huge offence, David Baddiel in 2002; and so on.

The above list shows how easy it is for even the best intentioned to find themselves embroiled in controversy. It is true to say that the 2012 panel began its discussions with trepidation. But most emphatically it was not because we feared joining the ranks of the notorious. Yes, we were aware of the potential pitfalls. It was Stothard, though, not recent history, who was behind the nervous energy that filled the meetings. His uncompromising attitude towards literary excellence felt like a direct challenge to each of us – to have our analytical credentials on display and finely tuned at all times.

We were absolutely discouraged from beginning any sentence with the words, “I like” or “I dislike” a certain book. We had to back up our analysis with references to the text, including paragraphs, quotes and page numbers. Literature may be about reaching the ineffable, but criticism is about tethering it back down to earth.

So how did a book make it through the winnowing process? Our aim, as has now been made clear, was to judge the novels, not the novelists; to consider the text, not the reputation. There were more than 30 former Man Booker winners and finalists in the competition. The only difference between them and everyone else was that their previous history gave them an automatic right to consideration, whereas the rest had to be nominated by their publisher. All 145 entries were put through the same process of deliberation; their form and content were subjected to the same aesthetic critique.

I was one of the many readers, for example, who wept at the conclusion of Rachel Joyce’s *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, and laughed at the vertiginous high-jinx of Michael Frayn’s *Skios*. But because the debates were never solely about taste they were two of the books I said goodbye to with a heavy heart but a clean conscience.

On the eve of our final deliberations, the bookmakers announced the prize was too close to call. They were right: the collegiate nature of our panel, its method of collective process and adherence to dialogue rather than advocacy, ensured that we began yesterday’s meeting with the same open approach as usual. The only difference was that we had two more elements to consider. First, had the novel in question revealed even more of itself on the fourth reading. Second, had it transcended the ambitions and constraints of its own genre. Three hours into the meeting we paused to have the rules read out again to us. By this time we were so focused on the novels themselves, we needed to have that reminder of our ultimate purpose. Were we choosing the most ambitious novel of the year, the most original, the most accomplished, or simply the best? The wording of the Man Booker is unequivocal in that regard: it is the best.

It was getting towards 3pm when Stothard held up his hand and declared it was apparent that Hilary Mantel was the winner. It was not that we were tired of deliberating, or that there was nothing more to be said about the books. But the strain of our discussions had become clear. Mantel had achieved an insurmountable measure of excellence that we all recognised and applauded. Only later did we take a step back to consider her great achievement as the first woman and first Briton to win the Man Booker twice. For us, our satisfaction is the knowledge that this feat was never a consideration.